DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 342 168 EC 300 927

AUTHOR Gerber, Paul J.; Ginsberg, Rick J.
TITLE Identifying Alterable Patterns of Success in Highly Successful Adults with Learning Disabilities. Executive Summary.
INSTITUTION Virginia Commonwealth Univ., Richmond. School of Education.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (ED/OSERS), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Oct 90
CONTRACT H133G80500
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adjustment (to Environment); Adults; Attitudes; Behavior Change; Change Strategies; Coping; Employment; Exceptional Persons; Goal Orientation; Individual Characteristics; Interviews; *Learning Disabilities; Persistence; *Personality Traits; *Self Actualization; Self Control; Self Evaluation (Individuals); *Success; Vocational Education; *Vocational Rehabilitation

ABSTRACT

This study sought to answer the question of how people with learning disabilities have become highly successful in various fields. It sought to identify alterable variables, that is, the behaviors that can be cultivated and shaped, that contribute to high levels of vocational success. A group of 46 highly successful adults with a history of learning disabilities and a group of 25 less successful learning-disabled adults were interviewed concerning their attitudes about nine areas: success, vocational issues, family issues, emotional issues, social issues, the learning disability, daily living, and conclusions/recommendations. Measures of self-esteem, work relationships, and achievement motivation were also administered. The following key themes were identified as characterizing success in this population: (1) the quest to gain control of one's life; (2) a desire to succeed; (3) goal orientation; (4) reframing of the learning disabilities experience into something more positive; (5) adaptability; (6) individual persistence; (7) creative coping mechanisms; (8) fit between abilities and environment; and (9) a social ecology of personal support. A model incorporating these themes for vocational success for the adult with learning disabilities is offered. (DB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED342168

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Identifying Alterable Patterns of Success in Highly Successful Adults with Learning Disabilities

SCHOOL of EDUCATION

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY
1015 West Main Street
Richmond, VA 23284-0001

FC 3009927

 BEST COPY AVAILABLE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Identifying Alterable Patterns of Success in Highly Successful Adults with Learning Disabilities

United States Department of Education
Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services
National Institute for Disability and Rehabilitation Research
Grant # H133G80500

October, 1990

Paul J. Gerber, Ph.D., Professor of Special Education and Psychiatry, Virginia Commonwealth University/Medical College of Virginia. Richmond, Va. Co-principal investigator.

Rick J. Ginsberg, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Education, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy, The University of South Carolina. Columbia, S.C. Co-principal investigator.

All inquiries for this project should be addressed to:
Paul J. Gerber, Ph.D., School of Education, Virginia Commonwealth University, Oliver Hall 1040, Richmond, VA 23284-2020, U.S.A. (804) 367-1305.

INTRODUCTION

As the field of learning disabilities widens its focus to adulthood, the issues of employability, employment, and work place success have become the focus of intense interest. Substantial progress has been made in the schools in the 1970's and 1980's. Legislation has opened doors and created opportunities that were only wishful thinking in prior years. All of this momentum has put increasing emphasis on the vocational outcomes of adults with learning disabilities.

Outcomes cannot be judged by the success of transition programs. Nor can the true measure of outcomes emanate from an analysis of entry level job placement. Ultimately, the judgment of successful outcomes must be looked at further down the vocational path in job maintenance, employment stability, career advancement and the attainment of leadership roles.

The literature on vocational outcomes of adults with learning disabilities is sparse and the findings reflect the heterogeneity of the population itself. We do know that there are issues of dependency, underemployment and unemployment. At the same time, there are exemplars for vocational success at all levels in the work force. Moreover, there are documented accounts that describe the successes of notable people in the history of civilization and on the American scene.

Currently, there is no research or common notion of how persons with learning disabilities pursue job advancement and become successful in their work. Unfortunately, there are few ideas and no studies that explain or uncover how success is achieved. This is in lieu of the fact that there are

growing numbers of highly successful adults with learning disabilities who work in business, industry, government, higher education, medicine, law, entertainment and other fields.

This study sought to answer the question of how people with learning disabilities have become highly successful in their respective fields. More specifically, the investigators sought to identify alterable variables, that is,the behaviors that can be cultivated and shaped, that contribute to high levels of vocational success. This executive summary highlights the findings (described in a full length research report) of an intensive and systematic study on highly successful adults with learning disabilities.

METHODS

In order to fully understand the success patterns of adults with learning disabilities, we used retrospective interviews as the main source of data collection. A causal comparative or ex post facto type of research design was employed in order to isolate those factors which are characteristic of the population of highly successful adults with learning disabilities. Thus, the research was designed to determine the causes for success of a group of highly successful adults with learning disabilities by comparing their behaviors with a less successful group of adults with learning disabilities. The main focus of the research design was to examine those factors or ingredients which led to success that should be transferable to other individuals with learning disabilities.

A population of approximately 241 successful adults with learning disabilities was identified in order to draw the study sample. Nominations

were sought from the National Network of Learning Disabled Adults, the National Institute for Dyslexia, the Orton Dyslexia Society, the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities (now Learning Disabilities Association of American) a number of other related organizations, Schools of Education, and institutions and individuals with knowledge of and experience working with the learning disabled population.

Screening of potential participants was done by telephone in a lengthy interview. Using the screening data, potential candidates for participation in the project were placed into high success and moderate success groups. Success, a subjective construct, was operationalized in terms of five characteristics - income, education, job satisfaction, job classification, and eminence in one's field. All screened candidates were rated as either high, moderate or low for each of these characteristics by a panel of experts. A group of 46 adults very highly successful in at least four of the success variables were chosen to be interviewed (no low ratings). In addition, a comparison group of 25 individuals rated as moderate to low in the success variables were also interviewed (majority of moderate ratings, no more than one low rating). The final sample included persons from 24 states and Canada, who were matched (in most cases, two high success for each moderate success group member) across several variables to control for their impact. These included level and type of disability, race, gender, age, parents' occupation and parents' socioeconomic status (SES).

Each individual in the highly successful and comparison groups was interviewed using an open-ended interview schedule broken into nine

categories of questions - success, vocational issues, family issues, emotional issues, social issues, the learning disability, daily living, and conclusions/recommendations. Interviews lasted from three to eight hours for each person. In addition, quantitative data were collected at the end of each interview using specifically revised instruments on self-esteem, work relationships and achievement motivation.

The analysis of data went through several phases before finally arriving at key themes and sub-themes. Beginning with placement of data into low-interference categories or clusters directly derived from the interview schedule, both within interview and across interview coding and analyses were performed to discern patterns. Ultimately, themes which transcended these original categories were derived and tested across all interviews and between groups (high and moderate success). This thematic analysis helped pull together large amounts of data, and the final categories and findings were drawn directly from participants' input through the retrospective interviews. Given the importance of verifying conclusions in this type of data analysis, numerous individuals and several levels of analysis were employed to test the validity of the themes discerned from the data.

FINDINGS

The findings from the seventy-one interviews with the adults with learning disabilities revealed key themes which characterized success. The themes, though not mutually exclusive, were rather discreet but interacted very strongly with one another. All of the interviewed adults discussed behaviors characteristic of the themes we identified, though the quality

distinguishing the high and moderate success groups was the degree of attainment within each of these areas. While the distinction between groups was often very subtle, the analysis revealed clear differences. The high success adults with learning disabilities were more advanced or exceptional than their moderate counterparts in each of the derived themes.

CONTROL

One overriding theme characterized all efforts geared towards success. The driving factor underlying success for all participants was the quest to gain control of one's life. Successful adults with learning disabilities were able to take control of their lives, and the greater the degree of control, the greater the likelihood of success. Control meant making conscious decisions to take charge of one's life, and adapting and shaping oneself in order to move ahead. The adults we interviewed spent their lives deciding and learning how to take control of their existence. This control was the fuel that fired their success, and it had internal as well as external components.

The pursuit of control involved two sets of themes we refer to as 'internal decisions' and 'external manifestations'. The internal decisions included a desire to succeed, being goal oriented, and an internal reframing of the learning disabilities ordeal into a more positive or productive experience. The external manifestations were all ways of being what we call adaptable. Adaptability was a key for unleashing the potential within each person through a set of specific coping strategies and techniques. Adaptability included four components - individual persistence, a set of

coping mechanisms we call learned creativity, a goodness of fit between one's abilities and the environment, and a pattern or social ecology of personal support and planned experiences designed to foster success.

Internal Decisions

Success just did not happen for the adults with learning disabilities interviewed for this study. The beginning point was a set of internal, very personal decisions. Success for adults with learning disabilities evolved. But this process, which spanned numerous years before control, and ultimately success were achieved, commenced with a conscious set of decisions. One must want to succeed, must set achievable goals, and must confront the learning disability so that appropriate measures may be taken to heighten the likelihood of success.

Desire - Clearly one needs the desire to excel in order to excel. At some point in time the highly successful adults with learning disabilities decided it was time to move on. But given the many hurdles these people confront, this desire to prove oneself is a great challenge. For some, the desire cam early in life, for others it developed over time. But it was very conspicuous and very powerful. Several in the high success group invoked metaphors relating to fire in describing the feeling. The desire to them was "like a burning inside." And although the moderate success group also displayed a desire to get ahead, it was not nearly as strong as that described by the high success adults with learning disabilities.

Goal Orientation - Closely related to the internal decision concerning desire, the most successful adults with learning disabilities consciously

set goals for themselves. These people need success, they are anxious about the possibility of failure, so they set explicit goals to work towards. Goals must be set for several reasons. First, it helps the individual with a learning disability have realistic, achievable aspirations. It also provides specific focus for those who probably have experienced great difficulty in learning and other common activities. And goal setting feeds on itself, for once even minimal goals can be achieved, the feelings of success may be the basis for setting more challenging goals. The goals set were both short and long term, although the moderate group set more short term goals and were more easily diverted from their objectives than the high success individuals.

Reframing - Perhaps the key component of the internal decisions was the process identified as reframing. This reframing, or reinterpretation of the learning disabilities experience into a more positive manner, involves appreciating that the key problem is not the disability itself, but rather the capacity to confront the various challenges one faces in living with and overcoming it. Reframing was composed of several stages which closely interacted together. Some individuals moved through all stages almost in unison, while others moved methodically from one to the next.

The first stage involved the need to recognize the disability. It is impossible for anyone to devise strategies to overcome a disability unless the disability itself is recognized. For some, this simply meant recognizing that they did things differently from others. But recognition was a key beginning point.

The second stage in reframing was that a degree of acceptance had to be attained. This acceptance could involve accepting both the negative (e.g. do not learn quickly so there is a need to work harder than others) and positive (e.g. forces you to develop other areas of strength) aspects of the disability. But, until one accepts that the disability is real and it is something one would have to confront, moving ahead was impossible.

With acceptance came the third stage, understanding. Successful adults with learning disabilities recognized and accepted their weaknesses and differences and built upon their strengths. Thus, an understanding of strengths and weaknesses is of paramount importance for ultimate success.

The final stage of reframing was action. All the recognition, acceptance and understanding in the world are useless without a conscious set of decisions to take specific action toward goals. Obviously, the adults with learning disabilities all chose to do something about their circumstances which helped foster their success.

For the moderately successful adults with learning disabilities, reframing was also important. But they did not travel through all four stages as effectively as the high success adults. They tended to have more trouble with acceptance, their understanding was often less complete, and their actions were far less decisive. In sum, their reframing was not as extensive.

External Manifestations - Adaptability

Along with the internal components of gaining control, the adults with learning disabilities exhibited or undertook certain activities which helped

to foster their control and ultimate success. The internal decisions were the beginning points, but gaining control of one's life required translating them into actual behaviors as a means of unleashing the potential within each person. All of the successful adults with learning disabilities adapted so that they could excel in a world biased in favor of non-learning disabled persons. The components of adaptability included persistence, goodness of fit with the environment, coping behaviors or learned creativity, and utilizing support and developing learning activities we refer to as social ecologies.

Persistence - Successful adults with learning disabilities work extremely hard. While desire was a key internal decision, its external expression came in the form of persistence. Thus, these individuals not only had a desire to achieve, they were willing to sacrifice and persevere towards the goals they set for themselves. The interviewees constantly explained the need for being willing to do "whatever was necessary" in order to accomplish, and this often meant working harder than anyone else. No matter the challenges or hurdles, this perseverance was a way of life, a part of their common characteristic of resiliency. And compared to the moderate success group, the high success adults with learning disabilities were more driven, they took more risks, while not being as easily distracted.

Goodness of Fit - A significant part of adaptability was the goodness of fit sought with the environment. In other words, the successful adults with learning disabilities tried to fit themselves to surroundings and

environments in which they could succeed, where their skills and abilities could be optimized. Some were in positions where they could actually create or orchestrate the environment to fit their needs. But the environments they either selected or created were such that they could maximize their strengths while allowing for compensation for weaknesses, usually in the form of some technological or "people" assistance. They worked in settings where they could be their own boss or had the flexibility to control their destiny and make significant decisions about their work. The high success adults were situated in environments where they could be both comfortable and successful, and were far more enthusiastic about their work than the moderate adults.

Learned Creativity - The essence of adaptability was the learned creativity displayed by the adults with learning disabilities. Learned creativity refers to the various strategies, devices and other mechanisms devised by the successful adults to enhance their ability to perform well. These individuals invariably had experienced some difficulty operating in the "regular" system, so they developed their own ways of doing things. After all, these people recognized (perhaps as a part of reframing) that there was little or no incentive to conform to a system that exposed their weaknesses. So they came up with personal, and often very creative ways to accomplish tasks and generally survive. For the moderate group, the learned creativity was decidedly less apparent, as much of their energy was often geared to manipulating the system to avoid exposing their disability (as opposed to creativity geared towards getting ahead). For the high success

group, there was an understanding that there are divergent approaches to problem solving, so they developed a variety of means to overcome obstacles related to their particular abilities. In short, they learned to creatively excel.

Social Ecologies - Successful adults with learning disabilities surrounded themselves with supportive and helpful people, and they upgraded their skills by devising personal improvement programs. This support and self-improvement process we call their social ecology. Most of the successful adults with learning disabilities created support networks (e.g. friends, family, spouse) and consciously selected their mentors. But having support available and actually accepting it are not always the same. In the case of the high success adults, they recognized and took advantage of help they needed in overcoming hurdles. Similarly, many of the adults with learning disabilities developed their own apprenticeship type of programs to bolster certain skills. This meant hiring people to help them in areas where they could not perform well. In other instances, support came in the form of simple comforting when success seemed very distant. But support provided the adult with learning disabilities with a greater degree of control over their lives, and aided in achieving their success. For the moderately successful group, support was important, but the degree of support utilized and willingness to accept it were less evident than with the high success group.

A MODEL OF VOCATIONAL SUCCESS

Given the identified themes and the consistent distinction between the high and moderate success groups in terms of attainment within each theme, a pattern or model for vocational success for the adult with learning disabilities can be developed. Figure 1 is a representation of the model. The model implies that success in the work place is a function of the degree of control of their lives attained by the adult with a learning disability. This control, however, is dependent upon the set of internal decisions (desire, goal orientation and reframing) and external manifestations of those decisions)persistence, goodness of fit, learned creativity, social ecologies). The internal decisions are the necessary starting point before one develops adapting mechanisms. But this is a reciprocal relationship. The more that effective adapting takes place, the stronger the desire, goal orientation and reframing. Positive adapting experiences enhance control, as do positive internal decisions. But the two sets of themes work in concert, not alone. At the same time, as greater control is attained, more adapting takes place (which positively influences the internal decisions). Success, no matter the degree of control, is ever automatic. Yet, the greater the control achieved, the stronger the likelihood of success.

CONCLUSION

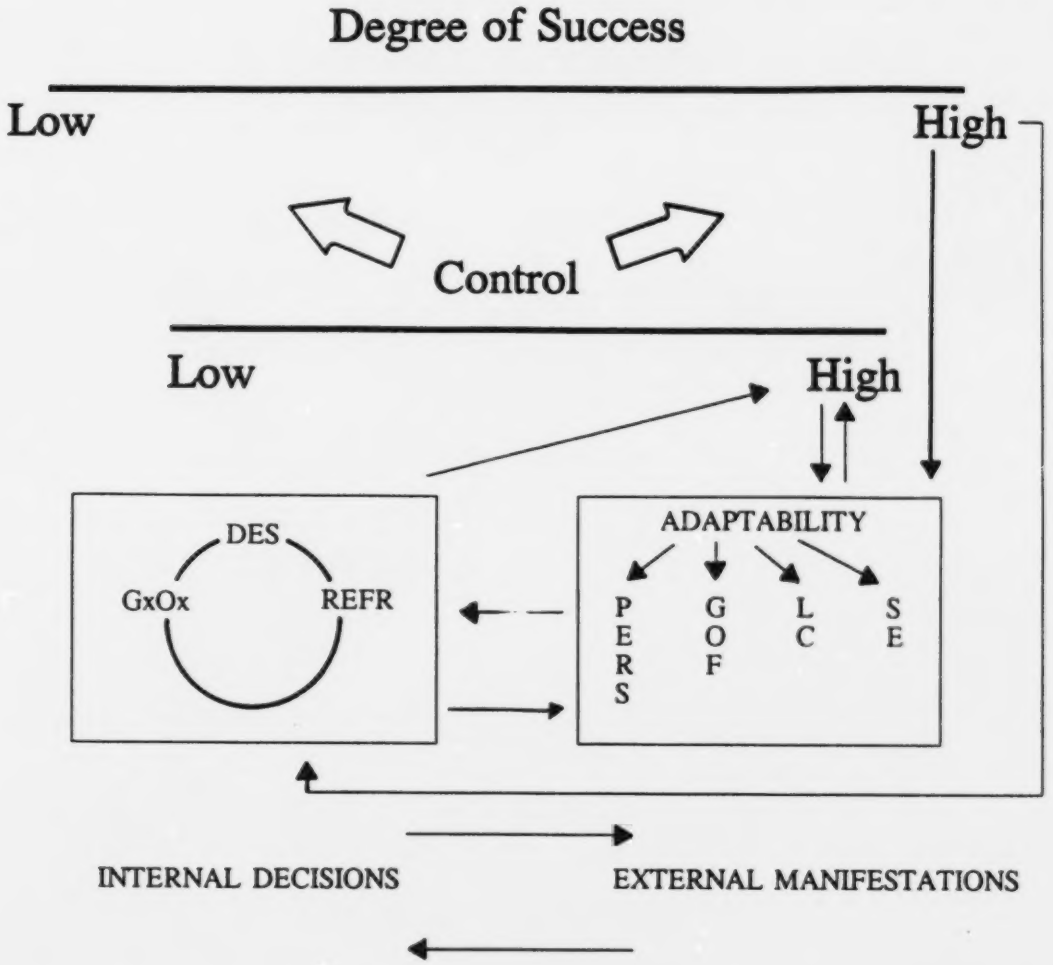
This study presents the first in-depth examination of success in adults with learning disabilities. Variables which can be characterized as alterable have been identified for a highly successful group of adults with learning disabilities. Their experiences show that even with the tremendous

hurdles and pain they faced during their lives, success is attainable. The data and findings imply that successful vocational functioning is predicated on an interaction between the adult with learning disabilities and his/her environment. The model which has been developed as a product of this research cannot guarantee success. Yet it is prudent to say that one cannot attain high levels of success without many of these alterable variables being part of an individual's behavioral repertoire.

The model as presented has a number of implications for the field. The alterable variables discovered in this study can have a far reaching impact on curriculum and teacher and learner styles, on counseling and parenting strategies, and ultimately, on a field which needs to provide more conceptual linkages between professional practice and vocational outcomes.

FIGURE 1

A MODEL OF VOCATIONAL SUCCESS FOR ADULTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES



- KEY -

DES = Desire
REFR = Reframing
GxOx = Goal Oriented
PERS = Persistence
GOF = Goodness of Fit
LC = Learned Creativity
SE = Social Ecologies